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Review of the doctoral dissertation written by Nguyet Duy Khang, MA titled:

***Problematizing Significant Learning at the University of Gdańsk: The
International Students' Perspective (Znaczące uczenie się studentów
obcokrajowców w Uniwersytecie Gdańskim)***

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Primary supervisor

Dr hab. Teresa Bauman, Professor of WSB

As the dissertation was written from a student (i.e. outsider) perspective, the project made it possible to discern and explore the specificities of the host university's academic culture and the researcher's own learning and teaching habits formed in the course of school socialisation and education in the home culture. It is an interesting perspective both for learners and teachers and it helps retain the "other's" position in research and interpretation of the collected data. In his PhD dissertation, Nguyet Duy Khang focused on higher education as a site of what has come to be referred to as significant learning. His choice of the research field and area was highly pertinent as it is "the university" that is the priority issue among those discussed in the academic, journalist and political discourse today. Importantly, the discussion centres not just on the role or function of the university but rather on its meaning and reasons of its being there at all (cf., e.g. R. Barnett, *The Purpose of Higher Education and the Changing Face of Academia*, London Review of Education, vol. 2,1, 2004; T. Bauman, *Uniwersytet wobec zmian społeczno-kulturowych* [University and Socio-Cultural Changes], Wydawnictwo UG, 2001). Academic studies most frequently analyse external factors as determinants of change in higher education (listing, among others, globalisation, information technologies, the labour market, commercialisation and mass character of higher education, etc.). The submitted PhD dissertation explores

rather the university's "internal" life, which means that it seeks to establish whether the reasons for the present position/assessment of the idea of the university include also the ways in which daily academic work – i.e. teaching and, in particular, students' and lecturers' learning – is performed.

The author provides detailed motives behind his choice to focus on *significant learning*. He was essentially guided by the idea of finding out "what it means to be a good teacher." The question is particularly pertinent in the time of an education crisis experienced by Vietnamese society, which the author carefully portrays in the Introduction (pp. 4 – 8). Based on the survey of the literature on teaching/learning theory and drawing on empirical research findings, Nguyet Duy Khang concludes that the fundamental feature of "a good teacher" lies in supporting students' significant learning. This belief prompted his research work aimed to "explore the image of an effective teacher facilitating significant learning" (p. 7). Discussing the reasons behind his research project, the author points also at the fact that the SL approach is largely absent in Polish research on students' learning and at his own curiosity about how (students') learning is perceived by university teachers and whether the process is "visible" to academics in the first place. The author is also convinced that his research findings will support his further academic work in disseminating the SL concept and knowledge about SL-promoting factors.

The dissertation has a proper structure specific to research works. It consists of an Introduction, a Review of the Relevant Literature, Chapters devoted to methodologies of the author's original research, subsequent Chapters in which research findings are presented and the last Chapter discussing implications, conclusions and perspectives for further research on SL in higher education. The next part of the dissertation includes abundant and relevant bibliography and a list of numerous tables, figures, diagrams and maps used throughout to present the research findings. The last part contains annexes with research tools and a complete resource of a classroom management course used in action research.

The analysis of the collected data is based on two basic categories introduced by the author. They are "teachers' orientations" and "a taxonomy of significant learning" as developed by L. D. Fink (2003, pp. 18 – 20). The candidate adopted (borrowed) the "SL

taxonomy” for his research while he developed the “teachers’ orientations” category on the basis of empirical survey research preceding the research proper of his project.

The literature review is well structured, containing a survey of theories of learning as a socio-cultural phenomenon with change as its immanent feature. With relationships conceptualised in this way, L. D. Fink’s taxonomy of learning seems a natural choice. Fink contends that: “students will always learn something, but good teachers want their students to learn something important or significant” and insists that “no change, no learning.” This approach is, I believe, shared by the author. The content discussed in Chapter One is given coherence by a construct consisting in relating the inquiries into learning exclusively to the formal framework of teaching in higher education. I find this part of the dissertation adequate, though I could wish for a more detailed discussion of the genesis of the concept chosen by the candidate, inclusive of voices of its continuators and critique offered by opponents of this approach.

The methodological build-up of the dissertation consists of two stages: 1. Surveys – a pre-study preceding research proper; 2. Research proper carried out within the qualitative research paradigm, in which answers to the main research questions are sought by means of (in-depth) interviews, participant observation (progressing from “an outsider” to “an insider,” depending on the course of research) and action research.

The pre-study surveys aimed to describe the case study of the University of Gdansk through finding out “what makes a good teacher” (p. 30). The question was distributed among students (Polish and foreign, in education and non-education programmes), and their answers were put into a catalogue of six teachers’ orientations distinguished by the author (expertise orientation, teaching orientation, student orientation, communication orientation and personal orientation). Subsequently, still before commencing the research proper, Nguyet Duy Khang compared “teachers’ orientations” and Fink’s “taxonomy of significant learning.” He established and substantiated a correlation between dimensions of significant learning and the distinguished teachers’ orientations (pp. 40 – 43). Certainly, these insights were a stepping stone for further research carried out within the PhD project.

The candidate commenced his research proper with field research. Due to an interesting methodological solution, the adopted triangulation perspective concerns mainly methods, research techniques and data in the project. The detailed research design was meticulously developed; it is well-founded and logical (p. 48-49). The sampling and the selection of forms that SL can take were deliberate and well-founded so as to guarantee heterogeneity of data sources. In-depth interviews focusing on work biographies of the respondents were administered to three university teachers who taught the social sciences-related courses and to a group of eight international students participating in an Erasmus mobility scheme. The latter interviews aimed to find out about the international students' assessments of their learning process at the University of Gdansk, relations with teachers and ways that the teachers used to support/facilitate the students' learning. The international students were also asked to describe their idea of "a good teacher" based on their learning experiences at the University of Gdansk and at their home universities. The observations included four different formats of university classes (a seminar, lectures, tutorials and workshops, totalling at 100 hours of classes).

In the second stage, the study relying on action research methods involved a classroom management course that the researcher taught for three years. The research drew on a variety of data sources, such as the researcher's diary, the course description, students' expectations vis-à-vis the course (45) and reflections after completion of the course (96).

In its various stages, the research project built on different methodologies as the research findings were supposed to answer two separate research questions (p. 47): 1) How do the teachers facilitate students' significant learning? 2) How does the practicum process consolidate and contribute to the teachers' facilitation and emancipation of learners significant learning?

Chapters Three and Four describe the methodologies used in the study as well as the course of the research the candidate carried out, making a distinction between field research methods (interviews and observations) and action research methods. The two Chapters are effective and written in a very good academic style. The candidate relies on the

adequate methodological literature and fully understands the necessity to explain the choice of his research focus and frameworks as well as to fully account for his data sources and analytical procedures. The ample and meticulous details provided in these Chapters do credit to the candidate's research competence, use of methods, research techniques and analytical skill. Having read the methodological literature insightfully, Nguyet Duy Khang is also aware of the shortcomings of the research approaches of his choice.

The empirical Chapters of the dissertation present the research findings and their cognitive and practical implications. Chapter Five discusses the findings concerning university teachers and their orientations related to teaching international students. The researcher concludes that there are elements of facilitating students' significant learning that go beyond the adopted kinds of teachers' orientations. It is still an open-ended question whether the described teachers' orientations concern only international student, or whether they perhaps also pertain to all students, Polish and international alike. The following Chapter contains the findings of action research, both cognitive ones as well as those related to modification of teaching practice, given the fundamental aim of the course, that is, facilitation of students' significant learning. The qualitative data were analysed correctly, consistent with the coding and analytical procedures of qualitative data. The Chapters contain abundant descriptions illustrated with quotes from the respondents, which substantiate the insights and conclusions the author offers. The candidate presented both verbal and graphic syntheses of his research findings.

The dissertation's last Chapter sums up the findings and insights and formulates recommendations for applying them in developing the academic staff's competences. I believe that this knowledge is of interest also to the teachers at the University of Gdansk. The study confirms that communication and student orientations are most conducive to facilitating learning that is significant to students. In terms of the study's theoretical assumptions, Fink's taxonomy has been refined in the sense of urging that it should always be situated in the context, i.e. considered in the context of educational practices at hand. Based on the study, the candidate problematised "significant learning" as social, interactive, change/emancipation-seeking, learning outcomes-applying and helping the student to become an ever improving leaning subject. In turn, action research findings proved that

optimal teaching is teaching intertwined with research because its outcomes immediately modify the teacher's practice – in this case, so as to facilitate students' significant learning.

The dissertation's major deficiency is, in my view, a lack of coherence. Substantive arguments are missing that could highlight not only a temporal and thematic (SL) connectedness of the dissertations' various parts but also their content-relatedness. The dissertation could also use an explicit explanation of how recognition of teachers' orientations is meaningfully and substantively linked to action research (3 years of it). A research paper can also be given coherence by proper argumentation behind the selected research framework. In this case, it should be clarified, for example, that the number of interviews with students and teachers provides a sufficient grounding for depiction of orientations. Perhaps the two research goals as formulated in the dissertation (p. 47) should be explicitly given some common denominator. Or perhaps it should be pointed out how these aims evolved as new data appeared and empirical findings were interpreted. The analytical and interpretive parts lack also clear references to theories that underpin this stage of the study, help formulate new questions and augment the cognitive aspects of empirical research.

The dissertation's strong assets include a very solid and reliable analysis of the generated data. It means that the candidate has developed a sound research expertise, possesses excellent analytical competencies and is capable of synthesising the collected data and classifying the detected behaviour patterns. One can also praise the candidate's good methodological knowledge about the chosen ways of data collection, which I believe results from thoughtfully selected readings.

Given all these arguments and remarks, I wholeheartedly recommend that dissertation submitted by Nguyet Duy Khang, MA, titled *Problematizing Significant Learning at the University of Gdańsk. The International Students' Perspective* be accepted and the candidate be allowed to proceed to the next stages of doctoral procedures.

Exam question:

1. What is the role of theory in the submitted research project?
2. (possibly) Are international students counted among what are referred to as non-traditional students? Discuss and motivate your position on this point.

Eric Hunsen